

DEFENSE DEPARTMENT BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL RICKY GIBBS, COMMANDER, 4TH INFANTRY DIVISION COMBAT TEAM, 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION, MULTI-NATIONAL DIVISION BAGHDAD SUBJECT: THE STAND-UP OF THE IRAQI GOVERNMENT MODERATOR: JACK HOLT, PUBLIC AFFAIRS, OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE TIME: 11:32 A.M. EDT DATE: FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2007

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COL. GIBBS: Hello, Jack.

MR. HOLT: Hello, sir.

COL. GIBBS: How are you?

MR. HOLT: Just fine, just fine. Welcome to the Bloggers' Roundtable, Colonel Ricky Gibbs with -- the commander of the 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, Multi-National Division Baghdad.

COL. GIBBS: Well, thanks.

MR. HOLT: Sir, do you have an opening statement for us? COL. GIBBS: Well, I first want to say thanks for having me on. It's always great to talk to military bloggers or those that like the military. Our soldiers are doing great over here, and they stay connected to the blogger network. So it's great to be here and be talking to you.

MR. HOLT: All right, so thank you very much.

We've got quite a few folks online with us this morning. We'll go down the list as you dialed in, so when it comes your time, please just state your name and your publication, and we'll go from there.

Andrew Lubin, why don't you get us started off?

Q Colonel, good afternoon. This is Andrew Lubin from U.S. Cavalry ONPoint. I appreciate you taking the time to speak with us today.

Sir, from what we see, the troops on the ground are doing a great job. The locals are responding nicely. Can you tell us how the government of Iraq is responding after we and the locals clear and hold? Is the government of Iraq building?

COL. GIBBS: Well, I don't work at that level. I mean, the level I'm in I can only talk to is the local security for the east and west Rasheed security district. So that really is the Dora council, much like a town mayor, for lack of a better word. That level I can talk to. And what I'm seeing is you have an infancy of governance in the Rasheed district. They're trying to

learn how to govern themselves, and we're trying to teach them how to develop a fiscal plan for the district. And the challenge that they have that I can talk to is getting the government -- the city of Baghdad and even the national government -- to recognize these district councils and provide them with a budget and the authority to make decisions within their districts.

You there?:

MR. HOLT: Yes, sir.

COL. GIBBS: Okay.

MR. HOLT: And Andrew, are you still with us?

Q Yes, I am. The line is fading in and out.

MR. HOLT: All right. And Marvin Hutchens.

Q Hi, Marvin Hutchens with threatswatch.org.

Colonel, could you tell us a little bit about the Operation Dragon Talon II and the progress that it made directly in confronting AQI, in particular, on the 16th when it began and how it's gone since then?

COL. GIBBS: Yes, Dragon Talon II is a brigade-level, offensive operation designed at attacking al Qaeda as they are in Dora, specifically southeast Dora. We found in another operation called Dragon Hammer and Dragon Fire that al Qaeda were trying to establish a headquarters or a base in the Dora area, because it was a great location. So Dragon Talon II is a continuation of a couple of exercises focused on destroying al Qaeda. We've had great success. Just in Dragon Talon II, we've found 24 cachets with lots of explosive materials and weapons. We've detained over 102 prisoners who were put away for long-term detention. And of those, 17 of them are what we call the leaders, the high-value targets who finance, lead and organize these operations.

We've also been able to cut down dramatically the numbers of IEDs that were in our area. And we've also cut down the murders. We've got about a 60 percent reduction in murders since we arrived here and took over the area in March. That's huge when you figure we had 553 monthly when we arrived. And I think as of the 20th of September we only had 82 for the whole district of Rasheed. So it's been a very good operation, and the people of Iraq are even helping us in that, because they're pointing out where the enemy are and helping us find them.

MR. HOLT: Okay, sir.

Bruce McQuain.

Q Yes, sir. Bruce McQuain with qando.net.

A couple of questions -- one, you know, this is obviously a war of adaptation on both sides. My first question is, are you seeing any indications of attempts at adaptation to what you guys are doing by AQI? And second question has to do with intelligence which, obviously, drives this type of war. Can you give us an indication of, I guess, the increase in intelligence you're now getting now that you're out there living with the population?

COL. GIBBS: Well, the first question about adaptation is yes, the enemy is a thinking enemy. He adapts to what we do to get him. But we're much faster than he is. We've attacked his improvised explosive devices. We've seized his cachets; and therefore, he doesn't have the material to make those lethal IEDs in as great a number as he was doing before we got here. What he has done is he has gone to hand grenades and snipers. He picked those up to replace the IEDs that he was using.

The intelligence side of it has gotten much better for us. We obviously have a lot of great intelligence which I can't get in all the technical and the details on the phone. But I'll tell you that one of the things that is helping us is the people. Living in the neighborhood in these coalition outposts has helped the people realize that the American soldier is the greatest ambassador that we have. They trust the American soldier. They seek out the American soldier and give him tips. A classic example of that -- today, as an example, we had an incident where one of my patrols was out on a street driving and kids on top of a roof waved them down. And basically they say, 'Mister, Mister, no, no, no, no.' And to -- the theme of the story board as we published it -- why give out soccer balls? Well, we give out soccer balls to, obviously, lots of kids, but that's one very simple example of the Iraqi people, you know, supporting the American operations and giving us intelligence to help us defeat these terrorists and criminals.

Q Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay. David Axe.

Q Actually, Jack, I was hoping we could come back to me. I'm not quite ready to ask a question.

MR. HOLT: Okay, all right.

Christian.

Q Thanks, Colonel.

You talk a lot about going after al Qaeda in your area. What about the Shi'a militias? There hasn't been a whole lot spoken about that issue, and I'm wondering if you can give us some insight into what you're finding and what you're able to do to undercut those folks.

COL. GIBBS: Well, the Rasheed district has two parts to it -- east Rasheed and west Rasheed. We see predominantly al Qaeda in east, and in the west we have the Jaish al-Mahdi militias and the Jaish al-Mahdi special groups and terrorists and thugs. So it's a great mix of people in the west. We're not seeing a lot of activity out of Jaish al-Mahdi groups, because there are reports that Muqtada al-Sadr asked them to have a peace for six months -- stand down the military operations. And by and large, we think they're doing that. However, the special groups, the really hardcore thugs, have continued to target Americans and Iraqi citizens. So that said and done, we're still going after those criminals based on intelligence, from the local nationals, of those terrorists who are prosecuting violent acts against U.S., coalition and Iraqi citizens.

Q A quick follow up -- are you finding evidence of Iranian help with these groups?

COL. GIBBS: Yes, we believe there is based on the munitions that we're finding. We found a huge cachet, as a matter of fact, last night -- a great success story -- 36 rockets, two mortar systems. And these are the systems that are shooting into the international zone and to other bases in our area. And much of what we find in cachets is Iranian markings.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

Q Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Mike Goldfarb.

Q Colonel, thanks for doing this.

I gotta ask you about Scott Beauchamp, and I'm wondering if you can tell me -- you know, the last we heard on this was that your command had prevented him from talking to the media. And I'm wondering if that is still the case, or if Beauchamp has been allowed to talk to his editors at the New Republic or if you can give me any information on that.

COL. GIBBS: Yes, Scott Beauchamp is one of my soldiers. Based upon what we saw in the -- in the news, we had -- those are not good things that soldiers should be doing. So we, as every good unit does, I directed an official investigation to determine, one, if in fact the -- what he said is true, we need to take actions to prevent further acts like that.

We did an investigation, and we found that the incidents described in the article did not take place. He admitted those himself to the investigators, and so we proved that they were unfounded, and the soldier who wrote the piece has been counseled by the chain of command and allowed to assume his duties as an infantryman. He is not -- we can't -- we do not order them not to talk to the press. They can talk to the press. And our soldiers are the greatest advertisers for the Army, because they'll speak the truth and tell the truth in most cases.

So I'm proud of the professionalism and dedication of our soldiers, and I'm satisfied that this brigade is conducting our operations with the utmost professionalism and dedication. And that soldier is still serving in his unit today.

Q Sir, I can just ask you a quick follow-up here. So first off, to be clear, he did admit that those things did not take place?

COL. GIBBS: He did admit to the investigating -- not to me, but to the investigator.

Q And can you speak at all, do you know if he's been in touch with the New Republic?

COL. GIBBS: I don't know. I've got 5,000 soldiers plus, so I don't see them all.

Q I appreciate the help, sir.

COL. GIBBS: Sure.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And David.

Q No. Still not ready.

MR. HOLT: Okay --

Q Keep going.

MR. HOLT: (Chuckles.) All right. Well, any other follow-up questions? Q I have a follow up. This is Christian Lowe with military.com. Colonel, one other issue that has been exploding in the news recently is the conduct of PFD, you know, private security folks in -- in -- especially in the Baghdad area, and -- and the conduct of Blackwater in one specific incident. You know, the stories paint a picture of American soldiers being sort of annoyed by these guys, and in some cases at odds with them.

What's your view on this? Have you had any incidents with security contractors there? What are your policies toward them? Can you expand on that a little bit?

COL. GIBBS: Well, I can tell you that we -- I'm not aware of any incidences with Blackwater security guards in my area with my soldiers. I don't see them; I don't have any of those. So I can't really comment on what they've done other than what I've read in the press.

My policy like every soldier's policy, we have rules of engagement and everybody needs to follow them. And there are certain codes of ethics that we follow that I believe they ought to follow as well. We only shoot when we have a confirmed target. And we're very well trained soldiers, and -- so we don't shoot indiscriminately.

Now I don't -- I only read some of that in the paper. So that's what I heard in the paper. I do think there ought to be standards of conduct and professionalism in how they handle themselves. And if what they said is true happened, then they ought to be addressed appropriately.

Q But real quick what about other security contractors from other companies? Do you have much contact with them?

COL. GIBBS: No, I don't have any contact with security contractors. Those are mainly for senior officials. And all I have -- I have soldiers serving in my area, and Iraqi security force units. So I've not come across those yet.

Q Roger that, thanks.

Q Okay, Jack. I've got my question now.

MR. HOLT: All right. All right, David, go ahead.

Q Thanks. Colonel, hi, this is David Axe of Aviation Week Group. Okay, so the metrics I'm seeing here for the success of Dragon Talon II and other operations in your AO seem to indicate there's a lull in acts of violence. But are you feeling -- what evidence are you seeing if any that the underlying conditions favorable to sectarian violence are changing? COL. GIBBS: What I'm seeing is through reconciliation, which is -- which is a long process we started

a couple of months of getting the people to the table, the Sunnis, the Shi'as, predominantly talking to each other. We started this, oh, two or three months ago. And I meet with Sunni sheikhs, Shi'a sheikhs, and we talk about the differences and focus on the people of Iraq, and what they can do to help -- to help bring peace to the people.

And so we've been doing that. And the thing that we've done on top of that is bring in Iraqi -- what we call Iraqi security volunteers. These are -- are people who live in the neighborhood who volunteer to serve as security guards on key facilities and infrastructure, who at a later date will be allowed to join the Iraqi security forces.

Now granted, some of the -- most of the volunteers we have are Sunnis, because a large portion of my area is Sunni, and they have felt disenfranchised and not allowed to join. So through those reconciliation efforts we're seeing movement on both sides to come together and bring peace to the table.

Q How can you tell that's working?

COL. GIBBS: Well, I'll give you an example. We have -- obviously the murders have gone down. We -- again you heard me say 553 back in March, down to 80 as of September. And that's been a consistent downward turn.

Incidence of fire fights, gunfights between people, it has gone down -- we've gone from a peak of 315 a month down to just 94 now.

Artillery and rockets, we've gone from a peak of 157 down to just 30 in a month

IEDs, gosh, that's been the biggest killer. We're down to, you know, 60 in a month.

And those numbers are substantial when you look at the size of the area that we have. Think of a city of San Francisco or Detroit, which is about the equivalent to what I have, and about 1.2 million people. How many murders do we have in those cities on a given month? And these are just some of the indicators that we use of how well we're doing.

Q So you have 5,000 soldiers to secure 1.2 million people?

COL. GIBBS: I'm sorry?

Q You have 5,000 soldiers to secure 1.2 million people?

COL. GIBBS: Yep, that's about right, roughly. I can't give you exact numbers, but that's pretty darn close.

Q That sounds crazy.

COL. GIBBS: Well, not really. Because it's not just U.S. soldiers. That's just U.S. guys.

Q Right.

COL. GIBBS: You figure I've got at least double that in Iraqi security forces. And the challenge I have with them is training and teaching them and equipping them to high standards. And we've got three different levels of Iraqi

security forces in my area. We've got the Iraqi army, and that's probably the highest level, best trained. Then we've got the national police in the middle. And then you've got the Iraqi police, local police, the cop on the beat, cop on the street.

And so we've got three different levels, and we're now focused on recruiting and doubling and tripling the numbers of Iraqi police on the streets, which is what is sorely lacking. Example, we've got about 2,500, and we probably need about 6,000 is the rough number we have based upon, you know, population density of X numbers of policemen per 100. But you take the Iraqi security forces plus the U.S. forces, we've got enough to cover it.

Q Okay, thank you. MR. HOLT: All right. Any other follow-up questions?

Okay, well, sir, thank you very much for joining us, Colonel Ricky Gibbs with the -- who's the commander, 4th Infantry Division, or, correction, 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, multinational division, in Baghdad.

Thank you sir for joining us, and hopefully we can speak again.

COL. GIBBS: Well, I'm sure we will. But can I say one quick thing?

MR. HOLT: Yes, sir.

COL. GIBBS: My guys handed me a note here to make sure I get the facts right here. I referenced Beauchamp, he did not officially recant what he said. But further statements from folks in his -- troopers in his company and chain of command proved that the allegations were unfounded. Make sure I get all the facts right.

Q Then can we be clear, did he admit that the stories were false or no? Is he standing by the stories?

COL. GIBBS: He's standing by the stories, but the investigation from his buddies that worked with him and other investigations proved the allegations were incorrect, unfounded.

Q Okay, so he is standing by the stories?

COL. GIBBS: Yeah.

Q Okay.

COL. GIBBS: We'll make sure we clarify that. Right now, no, he's not. He had admitted, no, but he's not standing by it now.

Q I'm confused, guys. Is he standing by the stories or hasn't he?

Q Has he recanted?

COL. GIBBS: No, he's not. No, he has not recanted. But he's not -- he's no longer standing by his story. He will not -- and he won't talk to the media, they say.

Q If he won't stand by --

COL. GIBBS: We're not -- we're not prohibiting him from doing that.

Q This is Marvin Hutchins. So if I can -- if I can maybe find a way to say this right. Are you saying that he's not -- that he's not been -- he's not standing by the story in public statements or anything, but he's admitting, I suppose in theory, that the investigation has proven that he was false, without coming out and saying, I made it all up?

COL. GIBBS: Yes. We have proven through an investigation of unbiased parties, official investigators, that the allegations are unfounded.

Q Okay. Thank you, sir.

COL. GIBBS: Yes.

MR. HOLT: All right, anything else? Okay.

All right, sir. Well, thank you very much for joining us, and we look forward to speaking with you again.

COL. GIBBS: Sure thing. Thank you very much for calling.

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you, sir.

COL. GIBBS: Bye.

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